

Hélène Sallard

Centre Géophile

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Dynamics of Employment and Unemployment in a Czech-German Border Region – A Spatial Evolutionary Approach

Empirical question

The Euroregion Egrensis (a so-called trans-border region, at the cross of Saxony, Bavaria and Bohemia) is one of the many European areas that was concerned in the last 10 years by great changes and disruption. The changes in employment and unemployment may reveal some global or national tendencies, for instance the spatial division of labour or the national labour market policies. Taking these general contexts into account and stressing the dimension of change (opening of borders, transition), our question is whether and how territories may influence the evolution of employment and unemployment at a local and regional scale.

Historical relevance

The issue of employment is of first importance in an enlargement perspective, especially at a border of the European Union. Just think about the German regional lobbies which try to obtain a delay in the implementation of the labour force mobility freedom after the enlargement, in order to protect their own labour markets. Are their “panic” justified? We hopefully contribute to an answer.

Furthermore, this research intends to contribute to the understanding of spatial integration and regional differentiation processes in post-socialist Europe.

Theoretical relevance

Regional sciences outline since more than two decades the phenomenon of industrial districts / productive systems, showing the importance of social and territorial environment in successful economical dynamics. However, these studies deal with the result of change more than with the process of change.

The evolutionary theory seems to be particularly useful in the context of transition because it deals with the strategies of economic actors to adapt to changing structures, and not, like in mainstream economics, with “changes *within* the structure, not *of* the structure” (Lambooy and Boschma 2001, p. 114). This theory stresses on the one hand the importance of history, routines, institutions, differentiation and uncertainty, in the constitution of regional **trajectories** (Braczyk, Cooke, Heidenreich, 1998) and shows that spatial systems and structures act as a sort of selection mechanism that may, or may not, provide conditions favourable to meet the new requirements of change (Lambooy and Boschma, 1999). On the other hand, evolutionary economics has an emphasis on **human strategies** in the struggle to survive within a changing context.

However, this approach can easily be combined with the contribution of systemic analysis in geography, which shows that spatialisation processes of productive systems may contribute to their own finalisation and to their reproduction, even in case of unfavourable environments (Auriac, 1981, 1995). This contribution has been newly completed by the adaptation of the “resilience” concept to geographical sciences, showing how a spatial system may, or may

not, integrate a disruption to its operation, without changing its qualitative structure (Aschan, 2000).

In economic geography as well as in spatial economy, the issue employment-territory has been very few developed. Many scientists introduce space (particularly in form of distance) in labour-market theories (i.e. Fassmann), others focus their attention on the effects of labour organisation or new labour forms on territories (i.e. Azois) or on geographical aspects of employment (“classical” geography); and regional scientist as well as policy makers often outline the necessity of a territorialisation of labour market policies, but without a clear theoretical background.

Proposed alternative theoretical solution

Defining spatial employment systems as a constellation of three elements – enterprises / employers, employees/labour force and local authorities and institutions- which interact, my challenge is to demonstrate that the present evolution (transition) of employment is constrained, in a positive or negative sense, by a spatial organisation which is largely a result of long term evolutions (i.e. settlement structure, demographic features, industry locations, national borders...), but is also the result of human actions and decisions.

Theoretical significance

The theoretical significance is to adapt the evolutionary theory (already linked to economic geography) to the employment issue!

Historical / policy significance

This may be a contribution to formulate that regional policy is likely to fail when local strategies deviate considerably from the local context, when the policy objectives are embedded in the environment, and that policy makers have to account for the fact that adaptation to change is largely constrained by the boundaries of the spatial system laid down in the past. A more spatialised employment policy could be useful.

Methodology

Although I will not totally drop the Bavarian area of the Euroregion, because it seems very important to understand the trans-border relations of employment, I will focus my analysis on the Saxonian and Czech areas. So I will adopt a comparative approach, with the “most similar cases design”: these two areas have of relatively similar spatial organisation (this is an advantage of the analysis of a border region), and had 1989 a relatively similar economic situation. Their evolution since 1989/90 partially differ :

- they are still similar in terms of employment structure (importance of industrial employment and very few skilled employees for instance) – hypothesis: importance of spatial organisation
- their employment evolution differ in qualitative terms (more unemployment in Saxony) – hypothesis: importance of labour market policies and of decisions of actors, especially institutions

However, the border issue may become a problem in this study. Indeed, the effects of global or at least national changes (i.e. national labour market policies or international division of labour) are smoothed or exaggerated by the presence of boundaries. Nevertheless, two reasons lead to the maintain of this issue:

- boundaries are an important feature of Europe (!), especially of Central Europe (40% of the Czech population are living in border districts!), and of transition (opening of the international boundaries were the first step of the transformation),
- boundaries are a part of spatial systems, and as such they may play an crucial role in employment evolution.

Control areas (which are not yet chosen) will avoid to overestimate or underestimate the role of boundaries in employment evolution.

We will focus the analysis on the 90's, but, for we adopt an evolutionary approach, we will take into account a longer term evolution.

This comparative approach will be completed by the discontinuity methodology (a typical geographic one), which allows to determinate the levels of limits –in space- and disruptions – in time- ; as such, it is actually a multiscalar approach, a sort of control process too (by determining and differentiating, in this case, the role of local, regional, national or European levels in the evolution of employment).

Data, data sources

Available data are official statistics and statistics of the employment agencies. However, they are mostly not comparable, in time and in space. So the main information source are empirical ones, provided from semi-directive interviews with local and regional actors.

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